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ABSTRACT

Some of the dynamics involved in ability grouping classification at the secondary level are described via an examination of the decision-making process involved. Specifically, the practitioners' perspectives of the curriculum, their use of selected student characteristics, and their beliefs about the goals of the classification process were studied. Grouping decisions made by school personnel at five junior high schools in a moderate-sized midwestern city school district. The study involved in-depth voluntary interviews of 19 staff members, including five science teachers, six English teachers, four counselors, and four principals. Respondents were asked to make classification decisions based on the presentation of vignettes about hypothetical students. Results indicate that students with the same characteristics were recommended for different classes by different practitioners. The practitioners' perspectives of the curriculum and of student characteristics and practitioners' beliefs about the purposes of grouping were examined as possible factors contributing to the differences in classifications. Questions used in the teacher and counselor interviews are appended. (TJH)

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ABILITY GROUPING: DECISION-MAKING AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

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Instructional Grouping: Perspectives on Policy, Practice and Impact
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I. Statement of the Problem

The practice of ability grouping has been debated since its introduction in American public education in the late 1860s. Since its inception, it has experienced varying levels of support and adoption including rise in popularity in the 1920s and 30s in response to the universal schooling movement and the atttendant increase in diversity of student populations, followed by a decline in usage between 1935 and 1950 due in part to the progressive education movement and the view that such grouping was undemocratic. Beginning in the 1950s, ability grouping experienced a resurgence in response to Sputnik and the ensuing concern for identifying the nation's gifted (Findley and Bryan, 1971). Over 75 percent of all elementary and 90 percent of all high schools employed some form of grouping. A similarly high proportion of schools acknowledged such practices a decade later (Findley and Bryan, 1971). Today, in the throws of national and state initiatives aimed at educational excellence, ability grouping remains one of the most common instructional practices in American public education (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985; NCAS, 1984).

To date, the major portion of research on ability grouping has focused on its effects in four areas: academic outcomes, affective outcomes, socioecnomic and ethnic segregation, classroom proceedings. Less research has been done on the formation of ability groups. A 1982 general overview of school sorting mechanisims utilized by selected California public school districts described a wide range of variation in the personnel, procedures, and criteria used to place students in elementary and junior high school classes (Sugarman, 1982).

Other research completed on the formation of ability groups focuses on the procedures used at the elementary school level. Using information gathered from teacher interviews, one study examining the formation of elementary reading groups concluded that reading ability, behavior, general academic competence, work habits, and home background were the criteria used to form groups. While reading ability was the criteria used most often, it was never the sole consideration (haller and Waterman, 1985). The groups were, instead,

> created on the basis of complex amalgams of several criteria, (each complex and difficult to measure), variously weighted by different teachers, and formed with different pedagogical strategies in mind. (Haller and Waterman, p.780.)

Another study of the formation of elementary reading and math groups examined, through teacher questionnaires and student achievement test data, the structural and organizational constraints placed upon the process. The formation of groups had as much to do with teacher needs such as maintenance of discipline and desire for equal group size, as it did with measured ability. As a result, the groups varied in homogeneity which in turn led to varied effects on achievement over the year (Hallinen and Sorenson, 1985).

Because the research on ability group formation has focused on processes used in elementary schools, the purpose of this paper is to examine some processes used to form ability groups at the secondary level. The study examines the procedures used by one school district to place junior high students in ability grouped classes for English and science. The study focuses on the decision-making process and the placement criteria used by school personnel to make their recommendations.

One approach to analyzing the results would be to determine the fairness of recommendations. What constitutes a fair recommendation? To what extent are practitioners fair in their assessments of students? Which criteria are fair? Which criteria are discriminatory? Kenneth Strike analyzed the concept of fairness in relation to ability group classifications. On one level, the answer to whether a grouping system is fair is determined by judging the criteria relevant and the procedures inclusive of due process considerations (Strike, 1983). However, Strike went on to claim that the issue was more complex,

> ...few conclusions about the fairness of teacher behavior in classifying students can be drawn by simply discovering the criteria used to classify and the frequency and patterns of their use. Judgements of fairness also require a grasp of the dynamics of classification. Studies lacking such information are an insufficient basis for criticizing the fairness of teacher behavior. (Strike, p.125)

This study seeks to describe some of the dynamics involved in ability grouping classification by examining how the decision-making process unfolds in a practitioner's mind. What set of assumptions and attitudes does a practitioner utilize during the process? How are practitioners alike and different in their assumptions and attitudes? Specifically, this study examined and compared the practitioners' perspectives of the curriculum, their use of selected student characteristics, and their beliefs about the goals of the classification process.

II. Methodology

A moderate-sized midwestern city school district with a student enrollment of approximately 11,000 was selected for the study. The city population can be described as relatively affluent and largely white-collar. After graduation, 85% of the students attend college. The district's minority population is 17%.

The study examined grouping decisions made by school personnel at the district's five junior high schools incorporating grades 7 through 9. Enrollment at the schools ranged from 500 - 600 students. The population for any one grade within a school was approximately 200 students. Specifically, the decision-making processes used to recommend eighth grade students for ninth grade English and science classes were examined. This registration process represents the first time the entire student body is involved in between-class grouping. Before this point, some students are involved in special education or remedial reading placements. In addition, the ninth grade placements represent the first courses to be recorded on the high school transcript.

The study involved in-depth voluntary interviews of nineteen junior high school staff members representing the five junior high schools. Five science teachers, six English teachers, four counselors, and four principals were interviewed. These staff members can be characterized as experienced. All teachers were tenured and all taught eighth and/or ninth grade. At the time of the study, some teachers had course loads involving both grades. Many during their tenure had taught both grades. Several had taught at more than one school within the district. All teachers were fully cognizant of the curriculum within their discipline. The counselors and principals interviewed matched the teachers in tenure, experience with eighth and ninth grade students, experience in more than one building and familiarity with the curriculum.

In-depth interviews rather than written surveys were used to collect data. Because the focus was on the decision-making process of individuals, it was felt that the optimum means to gain a clear description of such a complex process was through direct questioning. Each respondent was allowed to speak for as long as he/she felt necessary on any question. For some questions, respondents were encouraged to "think aloud" their decisions. The interview setting spared respondents the burden of writing lengthy answers. The interview setting thus encouraged detail in responses.

In addition, the interview setting eliminated possible misunderstanding of terms or questions. The respondent was encouraged to ask for explanation of questions whenever necessary. Conversely, the interviewer could ask for explanation or elaboration of answers when necessary. Thus, the interview setting encouraged clarity of responses.

The danger of interviews is that the results can be termed unreliable if the questions are vague or if the judgements required of respondents is too abstract (Alexander and Becker, 1978). To minimize this danger, the questions were tested on two teachers who were then asked to comment on the clarity and specificity of the questions. Appropriate modifications were made. Each respondent in the study was then asked the same set of questions (see Appendix A).

The presentation of vignettes to respondents was a critical component of the interviews. Teacher and counselor respondents were asked to make placement recommendations for four hypothetical students. The hypothetical descriptions included seven student characteristics: sex, race, course test average, percent of homework completed, attendance rate, extent of class participation, social behavior in relation to peers (see Appendix A). The measures of characteristics varied between the four descriptions. In addition, each vignette included a mixture of strong and weak measures of the characteristics. For example, if test scores were low, class participation might have been high. These vignettes represented the more problematic scenarios possible. It was hoped that respondents thus would reveal in greater detail the intricacies of their decision-making. Respondents were encouraged to "think aloud" their decision-making and describe the reasons for their resulting recommendations.

The rationale for use of such vignettes is summarized by researchers Cheryl Alexander and Henry Becker. After analyzing studies in which vignettes were used to examine police and nurse reactions to crime victims, they concluded vignettes helped to standardize the stimulus across respondents and allowed for more realistic decision-making stiuations (Alexander and Becker, 1978). Similarly, this study found the use of vignettes created more realistic situations and allowed for comparison of responses.

The precedent for employing an interview format incorporating simulated decision-making on the topic of ability grouping was established in the Haller and Waterman study referred to earlier. In order to examine the criteria teachers use to make elementary reading group assignments, the researchers interviewed sixty teachers and asked them to assign their current students to reading groups. The interviews were then transcribed and comments were analyzed. Like the Haller and Waterman study, interviews for this study were taped, transcribed, and analyzed.

III. Results: Hypothetical Decision-Making

The teacher and counselor placement recommendations for the four hypothetical students can be placed in chart form for easy comparison. Six English teachers and one counselor were asked to make recommendations for placement into one of three possible ninth grade English classes: Intensive English (high level), English 9 (middle level), Basic English (low level). The results appear in Chart A.

Five science teachers and three counselors were asked to make recommendations for placement into one of three possible ninth grade Science classes: Biology (high level), Earth Science (middle level), Environmental Science (low level).The results appear in Chart B.

Fifteen practitioners each made four decisions. The total 60 decisions resulted in 44 definite course placements, 10 split decisions, and 6 undecided placements. Placement recommendations for the four hypothetical students differed; no student received the same placement recommendation from all respondents.

What explains the differences between practitioners in recommendations? During the interview, practitioners were presented with same set of student characteristics. The interplay between these and other factors somehow must have been different. In order to assess the reasons for the different recommendations, the practitioners' perspectives of the curriculum, their interpretation of selected student characteristics, and their beliefs regarding the purposes of grouping were examined and compared. Did practitioners view the content, goals, and purposes of the the courses differently and therefore differ in their recommendations? Did practitioners view student characteristics differently and therefore differ in their recommendations? Did practitioners view the goals of the recommendation process differently and therefore differ in their recommendations?

Chart A

ENGLISH CLASS RECOMMENDATIONS

Hypothetical Student

PRACTITIONER	SARAH	MIKE	JOYCE	BILL
KR, Teacher	Regular	Basic	Basic	Regular
KD, Teacher	Regular	Basic	Basic	High
BC, Teacher	High/Reg	Basic	Regular	High
DM, Teacher	Regular	Reg/Basic	Basic	Regular
RJ, Teacher	Regular	Reg/Basic	Basic	Regular
SS, Teacher	Regular	Regular	Regular	Regular
RD, Counselor	High/Reg	Regular	Regular	High/Reg

Totals for Sarah: 2 High/Regular; 5 Regular

Totals for Mike: 2 Regular, 2 Regular/Basic; 3 Basic

Totals for Joyce: 3 Regular, 4 Basic

Totals for Bill: 2 High, 1 High/Regular, 4 Regular

Chart B

SCIENCE CLASS RECOMMENDATIONS

Hypothetical Student

PRACTITIONER	SARAH	MIKE	JOYCE	BILL
BJ, Teacher	Regular	Low	Low	Regular
BA, Teacher	Regular	Reg/Low	Low	Regular
RR, Teacher	Reg/Low	Regular	Regular	Regular
MJ, Teacher	Low	Low	Low	High/Reg
MM, Teacher	High	High	High	High
FN, Counselor	No Rec	No Rec	No Rec	High/Reg
BJ, Counselor	High	Low	Regular	High
SP, Counselor	High/Reg	No Rec	No Rec	High/Reg

Totals for Sarah: 2 High; 1 High/Regular; 2 Regular; 1 Regular/Low; 1 Low; 1 No Rec

Totals for Mike: 1 High; 1 Regular; 1 Regular/Low; 3 Low; 2 No Rec.

Totals for Joyce: 1 High; 2 Regular; 3 Low; 2 No Rec

Totals for Bill: 2 High, 3 High/Regular, 3 Regular

IV. Results: Practitioners' Perpective of the Curriculum

The language used by practitioners in this study to describe the curriculum was remarkably similar and revealed courses differentiated in several respects. For one, groups are differentiated in terms of class content and goals. The content of high level classes was based on college preparatory material. Practitioners all shared this perspective of the high level coursework:

*In Intensive English there is increased speed, we cover more material, more books, and in greater depth...
- DM, English teacher

*The intensive (English) class on the other end of the spectrum provides kids with first of all a more challenging environment where kids who are very grade oriented and very success oriented and all of that could have a more challenging type of class where they read more, discuss more in depth, that sort of thing.
- FN, Counselor

*The biology class is a really high level, advanced level class for kids who really want to major in science and start out strong in that major.
- RR, Science teacher

*Biology is a very college preparatory course and the first step in a series of hurdles you have to go through to get advanced science in other schools.
- BJ, Counselor

*Biology is a definite college prep course.
- MJ, Science teacher

*We have three tiers in this school...biology is the high track science course.
- SP, Counselor

Practitioners described the content and goals of the low level classes in marked contrast. The descriptions of the basic English and science course content focussed on remedial or rudimentary skills with no mention of preparation for future coursework. The majority of practitioners shared this perspective of basic level courses:

*Basic Skills English is individualized instruction for students who have difficulty being successful in eighth grade English class....work is on general basic skills....
- KR, English teacher

*The basic class is paced more slowly than the regular class...kids in there are all in reading improvement....
- SS, English teacher

*The purpose of the class is to meet the needs of those students who are reading far below grade level. Work is on reading comprehension skills and is geared to their needs....
- DM, English teacher

*The intent of the basic course was to provide a place for students who are not reading up to grade level...
- FN, Counselor

*We have three tiers in this schol. ...We have Environmental Science which is the basic science course....
- SP, Counselor

*Environmental Science is a catch-all. The left-overs basically.
- RD, Counsleor

Another area of differentiation between the courses was in the area of class activities. Students in high level courses, according to the descriptions of practitioners, are exposed to higher order thinking skills and more independent work. Again, practitioners shared this perspective of the high level classes:

*(In Intensive English) we expect more critical thinking abilities, more sense of universality about mankind, things of that sort, so that the discussions are deeper and more mature.
- DM, English teacher

*(For Intensive English) the literal level...is more of a jumping off point in the Intensive classes. We all understand this, now let's go someplace else.
- BC, English teacher

In contrast to the high level classes, descriptions of actitivities of the lower level classes revealed an emphasis on the lower order thinking skills such as literal level understanding. The majority of practitioners shared this perspective of the basic level classes:

*(In Basic English) we work on short assignments. There is not a terrific amount of homework. There are lots of work sheets that are done quickly for immediate reinforcement. They are much greater paper consumers than either the regular or intensive classes are.
- SS, English teacher

*(In Basic English) we work on general basic skills - their writing, spelling, and vocabulary development....
- KR, English teacher

*(Environmental Science is) a hands on activity-type class.
- KJ, Science teacher

*Environmental Science is a course that is more of a hands-on type of course....
- MM, Science teacher

*(Environmental Science) is designed so anyone who has the interest to participate will be able to pass and maybe get a higher grade, definitely get a higher grade than they would get in Biology or Earth Science.
- MJ, Science teacher

*(In Environmental Science) most of the work is done actually within the school building itself. Limited kind of homework.
- RR, Science teacher

However, there were exceptions to this picture of low level classes. Two practitioners' descriptions of the basic English and science courses reflected a consciousness of the poorer reputation of the low level classes and a desire to include more of the mainstream material as well as the basic skills material.

*(The Environmental Science course) has traditionally, way back when, been...somewhat sadly and unfortunately, the dumping ground. ...Now, the course is being taught on a far, far higher level than it has ever been taught. That's the nature of the teacher - one who has made it into an excellent course that can meet the needs of kids who have some difficulty but also (meet the needs of) kids who are very good students.
- FN, Counselor

*(In Basic English) we try to cover what is as close to the regular ninth grade curriculum as I can possibly cover. We read novels, we read plays, and we read some of the literature that is on the required list for the (regular) class. But we do a lot more work on grammar and reading and very basic skills.

- SS, English teacher

The descriptions gathered for this study were similar in another respect: the views expresssed about the regular or middle level classes. Practitioners shared the view that the skills emphasized in the middle level classes were more like those in the high level classes than those in the low level classes. College preparatory material was again emphasized.

*The two (regular and Intensive English) are quite similar. We cover the samechapters in the composition book. We cover almost the same novels and short stories.

- BC, English teacher

*We have Earth Science which is a ninth grade college prep class.

- SP, Counselor

*Earth Science is also a course that is considered to be part of "college prep" series of courses. ...It is not designated as an intensive course as is the Biology but it is designated as a regular course. It is still a very challenging course.

- FN, Counselor

*The second course is Earth Science which is an academic course but not accelerated and that's the typical, usual ninth grade course.

- BJ, English teacher

*Earth Science is supposed to be a basically equally difficult college prep course.

- MJ, English teacher

In summary, practitioners shared a similar perspective regarding the degree and kind of differentiation between clases. High level classes emphasized higher order thinking skills and college preparatory knowledge. In contrast, the low level classes emphasized lower order thinking skills and basic content.

In addition, practitioners viewed the relationship between the three courses in similar fashion. The content and skills emphasized in the regular and intensive classes were more alike than the content and skills of the basic classes. The intensive classes were generally described as enriched versions of the regular. In contrast, the basic classes stood apart; their content was markedly different. It should be noted that this perspective of the curriculum reflects the conclusions of Jeannie Oakes regarding the distribution of knowledge in ability grouped classes (Oakes, 1985).

V. Results: Practitioners Use of Selected Student Characteristics in Decision-Making

Practitioners revealed differences in their perspectives of several student characteristics considered when making placement recommendations. This study found that practitioners differed in their views of student interest, reading level, and home life as factors in making course recommendations.

Six practitioners cited student interest as a factor during the hypothetical decisions. One decision-making dynamic was revealed when student interest was juxtaposed with student ability. For a high ability student, a counselor considered student interest a legitimate criteria when making the decision between placement in a high or regular class. The counselor did not consider student interest a sufficient factor for placement in the low level class. For example, the counselor described his reaction to a student who had expressed interest in the Environmental Science (low level) class:

*I sat down with (the student) the other day. She wanted to have (Environmental Science). I said, "Fine, no problem. Double up on your science." She's a geometry (high level math) student and wants to get ready for a long career. I said, "You've got to challenge yourself. You have to be in the courses where you are going to be competing with the rest of the kids. That's all there is to it. So double up." She's taking Environmental Science as well as Biology. She will do very nicely.

- RD, Counselor

Student interest was not a sufficient basis to place the student in the basic level class. In contrast, the same counselor commented on the English recommendation for Sarah, a hypothetical student with an average of 87%:

*Whether or not she wants to go into Intensive English...the difference between regular and Intensive English would have to be explained to her. ...It is an elective type of thing.

- RD, Counselor

In this instance, student interest was a legitimate factor in placement. For students with high test scores, the difference between the regular and high level course seemed a "safe" one educationally; the student would not suffer adverse consequences in either class. Therefore, student interest could be considered. The opposite was true for the basic level recommendation. Student interest (if test scores were high) was not a sufficient basis to place a student in the low level course because the course appeared to have negative educational consequences.

A related set of assumptions was revealed in the remarks of a science teacher. The teacher's answers regarding the four hypothetical student descriptions were compared. When Joyce, a hypothetical student with a 60% test average was described, the teacher made a recommendation:

*I would say definitely Environmental Science (low level).

- MJ, Science teacher

When Bill, a hypothetical student with an 85% average was described, the teacher commented:

*Depending on his interest, either Biology (high level) or Earth Science (low level).

- MJ, Science teacher

Like the counselor, interest was a factor for this teacher when deciding between the regular and high level class for a student with high test scores. It was not a factor when the basic level course was under consideration. It seems that instructional need supplanted consideration of student interest for students of perceived low ability.

Most practitioners shared this view. When the remarks regarding students with low test scores were examined, student interest was mentioned only once. In that case, interest became the determining factor between the low level course or no science course:

*(Mike) should definitely not be in the Biology or Earth Science course. If he has an interest in Environmental Science...it would be worth trying.

- MJ, Science teacher

When comparing comments about students with higher test scores, not all practitioners shared the view of RD or JM that interest would be considered in choices between regular and high level classes but not in choices considering basic level courses. One practitioner felt that interest was not sufficient to place students in the high level class.

*I would have recommended Earth Science (regular level). (Sarah) might have wanted Biology but my recommendation would have stood firm.

- BJ, Science teacher

Two other practitioners believed, again in contrast to RD and MJ, that students with higher test scores were not precluded from the basic level class if they expressed interest in the basic subject matter.

*I would not recommend (Sarah) for Biology. Unless she has a particular interest in Environmental Science (low level), I would probably tell her to take the Earth Science.
- BA, Science teacher

*I have some real question about Biology. If Earth Science or Environmental Science were an interest, that would probably be acceptable (for Sarah).
- RR, Science teacher

Reading level was another student characteristic examined. Differences between practitioners in their use of this factor were discovered. One vignette involved the description of a student enrolled in a remedial reading course. Nine practitioners commented on this factor when making their recommendations. However, the practitioners differed in their views of the remedial reading course and therefore in their corresponding course recommendations.

Three practitioners viewed remedial reading as an enabling educational support system and therefore one reason to consider placement in a regular course.

*Remedial reading doesn't have anything to do with it. As a matter of fact, it represents a good support system.
- RD, Counselor

*I think she belongs in (regular) English. She's enrolled in remedial reading and therefore doing a lot of it.
- SS, English teacher

*She would be a good candidate for Physical Science (regular level) even with the remedial reading as a factor.
- BJ, Counselor

In contrast, three different practitioners viewed remedial reading as a signal for the basic level class.

*Because of the remedial reading I think Joyce should be in the basic skills English although she does sound like a student that could pass or make it in the (regular) English.
- KR, English teacher

*I have a student very much like this one. I suggested, despite her attempts to do well, the (basic level) for her next year because she needs every bit of help she can get.
- RJ, English teacher

*I would point out in terms of Biology you're talking about a lot of reading. That would be a very difficult course. Earth Science....again, there's going to be focus on the reading issue. ...When I'd talk about Ecology, that's one with less reading, it's more a hands-on type of thing.
- FN, Counselor

For one teacher, remedial reading eliminated the possibility of the Biology (high level) class, but did leave open the regular level class.

*I have a girl right now who has remedial reading and I have a tremendous problem to give her enough time. The problem in Biology is that you don't have enough time. ...Most likely I would recommend Earth Science.
- RR, Science teacher

The final characteristic examined in this study was the home life of the student. Again,, differences between practitioners were found in their use of this factor. One hypothetical student (Mike) was described with test scores of 60% and a high absentee rate in part due to the recent stressful separation of his parents. Eleven practitioners referred to his stressful home situation as they made their course recommendations.

For five practitioners, Mike's home life contributed to their recommendation for the basic level (Environemntal Science of Basic English) classes:

*Mike should go into basic skills English due to the fact that he lets things get to him and does not seem to follow through on work done. In Basic Skills English, students are made to feel as though they can work at their own pace and it's a smaller class as well. The teacher can give Mike more individual attention which possibly can help ease any fears or frustrations that he has in class or even outside if the teacher has the time to do so.
- KR, English teacher

*I feel that Mike would have a hard time in the regular class. ...(he) has stress problems as it is, so it doesn't make any sense to give him more stress.
- BC, English teacher

*I think (Mike) has a sort of pre-occupation with his home life. ...He may have a whole lot of potential, but I think that probably the structure of the basic class right now would be best.
- KD, English teacher

*I would probably recommend (Mike) for the Environmental Science because that's a pretty slow paced course. It sounds like it's going to be a little while until we can turn this boy's head toward his school work, for a lot of good reasons. Parents going through a divorce, partly the separation, and he doesn't have his act together yet. So I would say he needs a situation where he's not going to have a lot of homework and that sort of thing and then have a hard time.

- BJ, Counselor

One practitioner suggested that Mike not enroll in science unless he was interested.

*I would ask him if he was interested in Environmental Science and if he wasn't, I'd suggest he not take any. It sounds like he is going through a difficult time. I guess that sounds crazy for a science teacher to say that four years of science is not necessary, but I don't think it is. ...Maybe with a year off and maturation and his emotional life back together again, maybe by tenth grade he could meet success.

- BJ, Science teacher

Two practitioners recommended Mike for the regular level class in spite of his home life.

*My guess would be to put him into regular English. His score is low but there is whole lot of other stuff going on in his life.

- SS, English teacher

*I would have no hesitancy about putting him in regular English. As a matter of fact, I would put him in a regular class no matter what. But I would try to build a safety net in by making the teacher aware that (Mike might have) a problem with absences.

- RD, Counselor

One practitioner placed Mike in Biology (high level course) consistent with her overall philosophy:

*I basically encourage everyone to take Biology. Now this student may not succeed there, you know, based on him making no effort to make up assignments, and so on, but I've had kids like that before for whom eighth grade is just rough and then they go on and they get it together. Somehow they make it. So I would want Mike in Biology.

- MM, Science teacher

The three remaining practitioners who considered Mike's home life wanted more information about Mike's previous record.

*The stressful situation isn't his fault and it seems a pretty natural way to respond. (I would want to know if) before the stressful situation, was he caught up in his work and that kind of thing. The toss up in my mind would probably be whether he could take Earth Science or Environmental Science. I would think that with all these other things he's got, he would not need Biology.
- BA, Science teacher

*If this were a pattern only for this year, I would probably make a different decision than if it were something over a period of years. A comment from a counselor would help. ...Earth Science would probably be my recommendation.
- RR, Science teacher

*I think you'd have to look back further. You'd have to go back to sevetnh grade. Maybe before (the divorce) he might have been wonderful.
- RJ, English teacher

VI. Results: Practitioners' Views of the Goals of the Recommendation Process

For some practitioners, the decision-making process involved beliefs about the goals of the recommendation process. These practitioners operated according to an overall placement strategy; they had a vision of the way students should experience classes. Seven practitioners revealed such guiding but differing philosophies. Opposing beliefs were evident.

Two practitioners expressed the belief that recommendations should result in a placement where the student would experience the highest chance for success. This belief was expressed for students with both high and low test scores.

*Joyce (60% average test score) could pass or make it in the (regular English) but maybe at the C range and at this point in time in her life she might need to see some real successes. I thinkg she could be at the top of the list in the basic skills class, like getting A's because of her motivation and willingness to participate in activities.
- KR, English teacher

*Since (Sarah) has an average test score of 85%, one might think that she could go into Intensive English but she does only 2/3 of her homework and I possibly see a reluctancy to show initiative. ...I would recommend her for regular English. She would feel comfortable and would see a lot of success.
- KR, English teacher

*I would say 85% shows he has the intelligence to possibly make it in Intensive English but I would like to see him head for a situation that is set up for success, not for failure, and since he turns in 3/4 of his homework, he'll do well in the (regular) class.
- KR, English teacher

*The fact that (Sarah) can pull an 87% in the eighth grade course means she will certainly has a success factor going for the Earth Science program. ...That's where she's going to have the most success.
- BJ, Science teacher

*Bill is obviously a good student. He seems fairly motivated and emotionally together. My strongest recommendation would be for Earth Science. I think he'd meet the most success there. He might do OK in Biology, but he's very likely college-bound and given that extra year...
- BJ, Science teacher

Practitioner KR summarized this placement strategy.

*Kids of this age need to feel some success in getting A's and B's on that report card.
- KR, English teacher

*They (teachers) need students who are willing to participate and generate discussions. (Bill) will help motivate the other kids (in the regular class).
- KR, English teacher

*It's (to do well) is good for self-esteem and self-confidence for young people at this age.
- KR, English teacher

KR believed that placing students in classes where they were assured success would result in higher grades and increased self-confidence. In addition, students in such placements would have beneficial effects on the rest of the class.

Other practitioners revealed a sharply different approach. Four practitioners believed that recommendations should result in placements where students would experience an academic challenge. This belief was also expressed for students with both high and low test scores.

*I would talk to Bill (85% average test score). To be a success he's going to have to work harder than he is now, but he'd probably do a good job in there.
- BC, English teacher

*I think Bill would have an easy time in that sort of middle strata of regular English, but I don't see any reason why he couldn't be challenged by the Intensive English. It may not be a breeze for him. Certainly if he didn't turn in more than 3/4 of his homework he may find himself struggling, but I feel some competitive stature.
- KD, English teacher

*If Bill turned in an election sheet with just egular English,... I would point out that Intensive English is an option. I would point out that this is something that he should try. And I would like to see him in it, only because he is black. I would see no reason he couldn't compete in that.
- RD, Counselor

*I would like to see Joyce (60% average test score) in a class that would make her stretch herself a bit. It seems to me like that would be regular English. You could work on the skills with her maybe in an after school tutorial or something.
- SS, English teacher

One practitioner was particularly supportive of this placement strategy. Practitioner MM recommended all four students for Biology (high level science). As discussed earlier, MM recommended Mike for Biology in spite of low test scores and stressful home life. The recommendation for Joyce (60% average test score) was similar.

*I would want Joyce in Biology. It would proably be a struggle for her, she might never be an A student. But she certainly is not going to be hurt by having more choices.
- MM, Science teacher

Again, the recommendation for Sarah was the same.

*I would want Sarah to take Biology because she doesn't seem to have any reason not to, and I think everybody should start high.
- MM, Science teacher

MM made the following statements in defense of placing students in academically challenging classes.

*I encourage kids to sign up for the most difficult course because it is easier to start out in a difficult course and then drop back rather than sign up for a less difficult course and decide in the middle of the year you want to move up.
- MM, Science teacher

*I basically recommend everyone to take Biology in grade nine so they can continue and go in more directions in grade ten than if they didn't.
- MM, Science teacher

MM believes students should experience challenge. In addition, MM assumes that students can move down a level if the course proves too difficult. Finally, MM believes that the higher level courses present more future options for students.

VII. Conclusion

The responses to the hypothetical decision-making portion of the in-depth interviews resulted in differences in placement recommendations. Students with the same characteristics were recommended for different classes. The practitioners' perspectives of the curriculum, their interpretation of student characteristics, and their beliefs about the purposes of grouping were examined as possible factors contributing to the differences in grouping placements.

Practitioners shared a similar perspective on the curriculum. All practitioners viewed the curriculum as differentiated in content, goals, and activities. Because the perspective of the curriculum was so similar, it did not appear to be a contributing factor to differences in placement recommendations.

Practitioners held different views of selected student characteristics. For example, respondents applied varying interpretations and degrees of emphasis to the characteristics of student interest, reading level, and home life. When considering student interest, practitioners employed different parameters regarding test scores and level of the course option. Practitioners exhibited opposing views regarding reading level. Students in remedial reading were either viewed as having a support system that enabled a higher level recommendation or were viewed as automatic candidates for the low level classes. Practitioners differed in their conclusions about students experiencing stressful situations. Some allowed stress to over-ride other considerations and result in lower level placement. For others, stress did not affect what otherwise would be the usual factors under consideration. These various interpretations of student characteristics contributed to differences in placement recommendations.

Practitioners also revealed differences in their beliefs about the goals of ability grouping formation. Respondents employed sharply discrepant placement strategies. Some believed students should be placed in courses that guaranteed success. Others believed that students should be placed in courses that provided academic challenge. Such opposing stategies again contributed to differences in placement recommendations.

The differences between practitioners in their views of student characteristics and their placement strategies have implications for policy makers. In the absence of district policy, students with the same profile could be recommended for different courses. The placements would be, then, functions of the teachers or counselors involved, not the students. For this reason, policy makers might consider an analysis of the factors involved in ability group formation. Further, policy makers might provide direction in the interpretation and weight accorded these factors. Finally, policy makers might articulate a preferred placement strategy.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONS FOR TEACHER AND COUNSELOR INTERVIEWS

(1-3) Please describe the purposes and content for each of the ninth grade courses (three total) in your subject area.

(4-6) Please explain how you learned about the purposes and content of each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area. For example, did you receive verbal descriptions? If so, from whom? Written descriptions? If so, is there a copy available? Have you previously taught the course?

(7-9) Please describe the process by which students are enrolled for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area. Please describe the roles of the teacher, parent, student, counselor and any others.

(10-12) Please explain how you learned about the process by which students are enrolled for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area. For example, did you receive verbal directions? If so, from whom? Written directions? If so, is there a copy available? Were you involved in devising the process? Or is your knowledge based on observations of the process?

(13-16) Please recommend a placement for the following hypothetical students. Explain the reasoning behind your recommendation by "talking through" your thinking process. Include comment on which factors were important in the decision you made. Include comment on anything else you would want to know to make the decision.

(a) Sarah, a white student, has a test average in your class of 87%. She turns in about 2/3 of her homework; her classroom behavior is typical for her age. She participates in classroom activities appropriately and answers when called upon although she rarely volunteers an answer or asks a question. She has four absences for the semester, all excused. (After initial recommendation, add: Joan's parents requested at a conference earlierin the year that she be placed in the top level course.)

(b) Mike, a white student, has a test average in your class of 60%. He has been absent 20 times during the semester because of illness and, his counselor reports from conversations with his mother, the recent stressful separation of his parents. When he returns after an absence, Mike makes no effort to make up assignments; as a result, about 1/2 of his homework assignments were completed. He is much less attentive than most of his classmates and has to be reminded more frequently than most other students not to talk in class.

(c) Joyce, a white student, has a test average in your class of 60%. You know she is enrolled in remedial reading. She completes alost all of her homework assignments, although her answers are frequently incorrrect and her writing skills are poor. Her behavioris typical of her classmates. She participates in class activities and seems to enjoy voicing her opinion in class discussions. She is very popular with her peers.

(d) Bill, a black student, has a test average in your class of 85%. He turns in about 3/4 of his homework; his classroom behavior is typical for his age. He participates in class activities and answers correctly when called upon. He oes not usually volunteer responses. He is popular with his peers. He has five excused absences for the semester.

(17-19) Please describe how you carry out your role in the registration process for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area.(If recommendations are involved:) What criteria do you base you recommendations on? Please rank the criteria in order of importance. How did you decide upon these criteria? Do you make the recommendations independently or in conjunction with others? Please explain. Can you give an estimate of the time involved in formulating the recommendations?

(16-18) Please describe any ways in which you communicate with students about your role in the registration process for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area. For example, are they aware that you make recommendations? If so, how is this communicated and when? Are students aware of the factors you use to make recommendations? If so, how is this communicated and when? Are students made aware of your recommendation for them? If so, how is this communicated and when?

(19-21) Have you experienced any instances when a student differed with your recommendation for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area? If so, how were you made aware of this difference? Please describe how you responded. In your judgement, how often does this happen?

(22-24) Please describe any ways in which you communicate with parents about your role in the registration process for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area. For example, are they aware that you make recommendations? If so, how is this communicated and when? Are parents aware of the factors you use to make recommendations? If so, how is this communicated and when? Are parents made aware of your recommendation for their own student? If so, how is this communicated and when?

(25-27) Have you experienced any instances when a parent differed with your recommendation for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area? If so, how were you made aware of this difference? Please describe how you responded. In your judgement, how often does this happen?

(28-30) During the process of registering students for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area, are you aware of any considerations given to the racial and gender composition of the total group? Please explain.

(31) Do you have any comments about particular strengths and/or weaknesses of the ninth grade curriculum in your subject area? If there are weaknesses, describe changes in the curriculum you might recommend. How do you feel these changes would improve the curriculum?

(32-34) Do you have any comments about particular strengths and/or weaknesses in the registration process for each of the ninth grade courses in your subject area? If there are weaknesses, describe changes in the process you might recommend. How do you feel these changes would improve the process?

(35-37) Describe your concept of ability grouping. What do you think are the reasons for the practice? Describe the benefits and/or drawbacks to the practice? Would you modify the practice in any way? (If so, please describe.) Would you like to see the practice continued?